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Hercules Mulligan

"I KEEP ME EARS OPEN"

(b)(3)(c)

"I keep me ears open." With this simple statement made in July 1776, and an accompanying "owlish wink,"¹ the proprietor of a fashionable New York clothing store hinted to Benjamin Tallmadge, later named Washington's Chief of Intelligence, why he, one Hercules Mulligan, "a genial, chubby-cheeked"² son of Coleraine, County Derry, could provide information of such reliability and worth that some of it managed to save the General's neck at least twice during the War of Independence.³

As he fussed over British officers and their hated red coats, the tailor of Queen Street would eavesdrop on the banter between his patrons from the King's Dragoons because, he once said smiling, "generals have a way of talkin' sometimes when they're bein' fitted for an embroidered waistcoat."⁴ Working under the cover of his business establishment, described as a "gathering place of the young elite,"⁵ the personable, engaging Irishman even went so far as to surreptitiously solicit intelligence data from his English customers. There was more than innocence in his inquiry as to when a British officer's uniform, brought in for alteration or repair, would be "needed" by its owner. Having secured a date, and coupled with similar responses from other soldiers, Mulligan would then quickly dispatch his trusted servant, Cato, to General Washington's headquarters in New Jersey with information concerning the redeployment of a particular unit of the numerically superior Tory forces that occupied the city.

During a late evening visit to his shop by a British officer seeking a new coat Mulligan gleaned through casual questioning that a plot was underway to take Washington alive, if possible, or dead, if need be. To the tailor the officer "vauntingly boasted that before another day they would have the Rebel general in their hands."⁶ Having fitted the coat to his customer's satisfaction, Mulligan wasted no time in sending Cato the courier once again into the night with vital information for the American commander. Upon his return to New York from one such foray, Cato was captured and beaten by the British who were more than interested in his repeated trips to and from the city on the behalf of his

¹ Corey Ford, *A Peculiar Service* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), p. 78.

² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³ Michael J. O'Brien, *A Hidden Phase of American History: Ireland's Part in America's Struggle for Liberty* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), pp. 151-2.

⁴ Ford, p. 78.

⁵ Luciel M. Mulligan, "Hercules Mulligan, Secret Agent," *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, (Vol. 105, No. 3, 1971), p. 234.

⁶ John C. Hamilton, *The Life of Alexander Hamilton* as quoted in Ford, p. 235.

Ears

employer, the tailor Mulligan. The loyal Cato revealed nothing, despite his thrashing.⁷

In 1781, two years after foiling the initial plot to take the General hostage, Mulligan again learned of an attempt on Washington's life. Using their own system of spies, the British under General Clinton had learned they might have yet another crack at their prized quarry. It was understood Washington was to travel to New England by way of the Connecticut shoreline. Hearing this, Clinton ordered his cavalry on to transport boats which would ferry them along the East River to Long Island Sound. Once on the Sound, the men were instructed to overtake the traveling American general and make him a prisoner of the King. Hercules' brother and confidant, Hugh, the owner of a successful importing firm, was given the task of stocking the British boats with provisions for the river journey. As the wares were supplied, Hugh advised his brother Hercules of the scheme. Hercules passed the information to Washington in time. Washington bypassed the shore route and entered Hartford safely.⁸

As much as he was an American intelligence triumph, Hercules Mulligan was a British intelligence failure. The son of Irish immigrants who brought him to America at the age of six,⁹ Mulligan, by virtue of his ancestry, harbored no love for the English. Before he became part Washington's highly successful and very secretive spy enterprise, Mulligan was much more overt about his feelings toward Great Britain and her rule of his adoptive country. Building a prosperous tailor shop in the heart of New York's residential district—a place where one could purchase the finest in Irish linens and the like—Mulligan actively sought the independence of the colonies from the mother country. He was a “known member of the Sons of Liberty . . . and several important Revolutionary Committees: . . .”¹⁰ So intense was Mulligan's zeal for the patriot cause that he persuaded the young Alexander Hamilton, a guest in the Mulligan household, to cast aside his early Tory sympathies and align himself with the rebelling colonists.¹¹ It was Hamilton, after he had come to America as a student from the West Indies and “found lodging” with Mulligan, who secured for his host the position of confidential correspondent of General Washington.¹²

And as a display of the Irishman's contempt for the British, Mulligan, five days following the signing of the Declaration of Independence and on the day it was read aloud to the city's residents, helped orchestrate the toppling of the statue to King George III that had for six years stood vigilant in Bowling Green. It is written that the lead from this despised and deposed symbol of British power was summarily melted down, providing the rebel cause with 40,000 badly needed bullets.¹³

⁷ Mulligan, p. 235.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Michael J. O'Brien, The American Irish Historical Society, *The Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, (Vol. XXVI. 1927). p. 97.

¹⁰ Michael J. O'Brien, *Hercules Mulligan: Confidential Correspondent of General Washington* (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Son, 1937) p. 13.

¹¹ O'Brien in *The Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, p. 98.

¹² Johan J. Smertenko, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1932); in O'Brien, *Hercules Mulligan*, p. 41.

¹³ O'Brien in *The Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, p. 99.

Ears



King's statue toppled . . . white-shirted hatchet-wielder may have been Mulligan.

Given Mulligan's inherent and demonstrated disposition regarding English rule, it seems all the more incredible that the King's soldiers would even patronize his shop, let alone engage him in conversation that could suggest Tory intentions. It is not, however, as if they did not at times suspect the tailor was up to more than simply lengthening a sleeve or shortening a trouser leg. Mulligan was arrested twice by the occupying forces, once on the say of Benedict Arnold.¹⁴ But between the traitor Arnold's lack of evidence and Hercules' natural proclivity for the blarney, he was each time set free.

The tailor's activities also spawned a certain distrust by those on the side of freedom. In his attempts to milk information from his English patrons, the Irishman often resorted to flattery, stroking an ego to secure information. The mere fact so many redcoats paraded through a shop which sported the sign of the golden thimble and shears, as well as the designation "H. Mulligan, Clothier,"¹⁵ did not endear its owner to many of the city's patriot population not privy to Mulligan's real purpose in promoting his Tory trade.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁵ *Ford*, p. 132.

Through it all, nevertheless, the tailor/spy endured, "silent as to his really brilliant service."¹⁶ He functioned outside the more formal espionage networks, such as the "Culper Ring," supplying Washington with the intelligence he both sought and valued.¹⁷ So successful, in fact, was Mulligan in maintaining his anonymity that Tallmadge, in his capacity as head of the General's Intelligence Department, once despaired to his commander-in-chief that "he (Tallmadge) himself was not sure what it was Mulligan was doing," and could not the General at least give him a "hint of it."¹⁸ There is no indication that Washington, who compulsively guarded the names and activities of his operatives, revealed anything to the frustrated Tallmadge about the New York-based spy. Both the principle of "need to know" and the protection of sources and methods were valued highly by Washington; he considered Mulligan's exploits of such sensitivity that the operational details remained unknown even to his own intelligence director.

Yet the Commander-in-Chief was to publicly acknowledge his appreciation to Mulligan one Sunday, known as Evacuation Day, 25 November 1783.¹⁹ On that morning, the conquering General and four of his aides reviewed the remains of the victorious Continental Army near the site on Bowling Green where Mulligan and his firebrands had years earlier removed George III from his pedestal. The military ceremonies dispensed with, Washington then walked to the home of Hercules Mulligan, the tailor residing at 23 Queen Street, and took breakfast with his confidential correspondent. This was both the General's way of thanking the shopkeeper for his service during the conflict, and proving to the good citizens of New York that Mulligan enjoyed Washington's complete trust.²⁰ It was vindication for the tight-lipped operative who did nothing to dispel the notion held by some of his neighbors that he had collaborated with the enemy. During the war, the Irishman's reputation had been sacrificed somewhat to his cover. Long on honoring those who had served him, Washington became a steady patron of Mulligan's shop following the war. The only mention made by the General in his personal papers of Mulligan are cash memorandums, written in his own hand and now a property of the Mount Vernon Library. One such notation shows the war hero purchasing a new outfit from his Irish friend barely two weeks after his breakfast with him.²¹

Washington continued his patronage well into his presidency and, as a resident of the Capital City (then New York), bought much of his wardrobe from Mulligan. The enterprising businessman wasted no time in taking advantage of his newly acquired status. The sign hanging before the tailor shop was changed to read: "Clothier to Genl. Washington."²²

¹⁶ John E. Bakeless, *Turncoats, Traitors, and Heroes* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott Company, 1959), p. 364.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 240-1.

¹⁹ *Mulligan*, p. 232.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Gen. Washington's Private Account Records for 1783, furnished by Ms. Ann Rauscher, library assistant, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 24 July 1985.

²² *Ford*, p. 314.

Ears

The affable Irishman, with his large family, prospered after the war, living well into his 85th year. He is buried in the graveyard of Trinity Church, near his compatriot, Alexander Hamilton.²³ A plaque recognizing Mulligan's achievements during the Revolution was unveiled on the 187th anniversary of Evacuation Day. It is located on the site, now a 24-story office building, where General Washington had breakfast with Hercules Mulligan, his confidential correspondent.²⁴

²³ Mary Darcy, "Hercules Mulligan: Washington's Own Secret Spy," in the *The Eire Society of Boston Bulletin* (Vol. 33, No. 4, February, 1975), no page.

²⁴ *Mulligan*, p. 320.

INTELLIGENCE TRIVIA

Miriam A. Quinlan

1. Which former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence was a member of the original Quiz Kids radio show?
2. Which former CIA officer was stand-in for Hollywood's most famous child star?
3. Vladimir I. Lenin, while living in exile in Switzerland in 1917, was denied a meeting with American officials at the Consulate in Bern because the duty officer advised him that all senior officials were gone for the day. Who was the duty officer?
4. What buildings in Washington, D.C. were named for outstanding women in history and of what intelligence significance are the buildings?

(Answers on page 91.)